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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Lomia, E. (2020). The evaluation of Russia's foreign policy towards Georgia following the 'Rose Revolution'. *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs*, 6(1), 112-128. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-67609-8>

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Peer review method: Double-Blind

Date of acceptance: February 28, 2020

Date of publication: May 04, 2020

Original scientific article

UDC 366.5:347.44(4-672EY)

366.5:347.44(450)

Scan the QR code:



THE EVALUATION OF RUSSIA'S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS GEORGIA FOLLOWING THE 'ROSE REVOLUTION'

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Abstract: *For more than twenty-eight years, following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Russian-Georgian relations have been a substantial ground for mutual confrontation, sharp dispute, and a lack of trust. Continuous tensions and disagreements have adversely affected efforts to achieve a proper balance in bilateral relations between the neighboring countries and resulted in a number of direct and indirect confrontations. Whilst the Russian president seeks to restore Russia's great power status, regain its past glory and control strategically important regions of the former Soviet space, Georgia, from the very first day of independence, tries to maintain its sovereignty and territorial integrity, develop modern state institutions, strengthen democratic values and integrate into the Euro-Atlantic structures. The paper aims to study Moscow's current foreign policy strategy towards Georgia following the 'Rose revolution' and argues that Russia's military intervention in Georgia, in August 2008, was a clear illustration of classical realism used by a great power in the XXI century. Russia actively uses hybrid warfare and regularly employs economic leverage on Georgia to eventually achieve its political ends in the Caucasus region.*

Keywords: *Russia; Georgia; Occupation; Creeping Annexation; Economy*

INTRODUCTION

The disintegration of the USSR (the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) marked the end of geopolitical tension between the two greatest superpowers of the so-called 'Cold War' the Soviet Union and the United States whose mutual antagonism lasted for almost forty-five years following the immediate aftermath of the end of the World War II. The World watched in shocked amazement how the Union of fifteen socially, culturally and ethnically diverse groups of states fell to pieces in 1991. Francis Fukuyama (1989) argued that a triumph of capitalism over socialism after the failure of Communism meant the victory of liberal-democracy, which would become the last point of socio-cultural evaluation of the society and final form of human government.

During the early years of independence, weak and socially unstable former USSR nations faced a number of internal and external challenges to maintain their freedom and national identity. Georgia was not an exception; the country with little experience of independence was confronted with the issue of reestablishing its prospective place on the world stage and redefining a right strategic orientation to the road to democracy and sovereignty. The Supreme Council of Georgia declared independence from the Soviet Union on April 9, 1991. The mentioned period coincided with severe ethno-political tensions in Georgia's two separatist regions: Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali Region (Rondeli 2001). The civil war ended with expelling the first President of Georgia, Zviad Gamsakhurdia from his homeland and undermined the power of the legitimate government of the country. The war drastically weakened Georgia's economic development and eventually resulted in the so-called unresolved 'frozen conflicts'. Despite the frequent meetings between Eduard Shevardnadze and Boris Yeltsin in the 1990s over the peaceful resolution of the Georgian conflicts, the negotiations appeared to be pointless since they inevitably ended in deadlock.

At the beginning of a new millennium, young charismatic leaders came to power in Georgian and Russian political elites, which in turn, hugely deteriorated Russian-Georgian relations over again. Since under Saakashvili, Georgia took an obvious pro-Western and anti-Russian orientation and the president became confident in achieving his political goals concerning the NATO, the EU, and the US, shortly afterward it became certainly clear that Russia would lose its 'sphere of influence' in the Caucasus Region and Tbilisi-Moscow would no more enjoy Shevardnadze-Yeltsin 'honeymoon'. The conflict between the neighboring countries was inevitable (Stent 2015; Sikharulidze 2014).

Saakashvili-Putin clashes of interest over Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgia's aspiration towards Euro-Atlantic structures (the EU and the NATO), and the 'pipeline policy' of Georgia eventually resulted in the Russian-Georgian war in August 2008, which brought the relations between the two countries to the lowest point following the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

Power change in Georgia in 2012 marked significant improvements in Russian-Georgian relations. The new government, under the coalition of 'Georgian dream', carried out a more pragmatic policy towards Moscow aimed at repairing the damaged ties with Russia by improving the mistakes made by the cabinet of Michail Saakashvili. Subsequently, after the GID (Geneva International discussions), the so-called Abashidze-Karasin negotiation format was established in Prague in 2012 as an informal channel for discussing trade and humanitarian issues between the two countries.

However, since 2009 Russia has been pursuing the policy of the so-called 'creeping annexation' in the occupied regions of Georgia. Currently, 20% of Georgia's internationally recognized territories are under Russian military occupation. The Russian-backed separatist forces continuously install and erect barbed-wire border posts in one of the occupied regions of Georgia- South Ossetia/Tskhinvali Region and detain Georgian people under the pretext of 'illegally crossing the border'. Fundamental rights of the local population are violated daily since the occupants install barbers through people's houses, gardens and cultivated lands (Modebadze and Kozgambayeva 2019). Thus, Russia's war in Georgia in August 2008 was a clear illustration of the theory of realism, according to which morality is never acceptable in international relations since powerful states show constant desire and continuous necessity to engage in war to defend their national interests, ensure the security or simply demonstrate the power. On February 10, 2007, at the Munich Security Conference, Russian leader Vladimir Putin stated that Russia had a real ambition to re-enter the world politics as a superpower and NATO's plans for expansion directly opposed the mentioned (President of Russia 2007). On December 3, 2019, Russian President Vladimir Putin again criticized NATO's expansion, called the function of the organization 'pointless' following the disintegration of the USSR. "NATO expansion posed a threat to Russia", declared Putin (The Moscow Times 2019).

The Russian Federation, which still remains a complex phenomenon among the world's biggest political players, vigorously neglected internationally recognized norms and principles of the 'Just War Theory' and violated the 2/1, 2/4, 2/7 articles of the UN. According to article 2/4 of the UN "All members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat of use of force against the territorial integrity of political independence of any state, or any other manner inconsistent with the purposes of the United Nations". "Nothing contained in the present Charter shall authorize the United Nations to intervene in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state or shall require the members to submit such matters to settlement under the present charter; but this principle shall not prejudice the application of enforcement measures under chapter VII"- is clearly highlighted in the Article 2/7 of the UN (United Nations 1945).

RUSSIA'S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS GEORGIA FOLLOWING THE 'ROSE REVOLUTION'

Putin's rise to power coincided with the so-called 'color revolutions' in post-Soviet space, such as the 'Rose revolution' in Georgia and the 'Orange revolution' in Ukraine. Both countries aspire to strengthen ties with western Institutions and reduce the dependence on Russia. While American-educated, Charismatic leader, Mikhail Saakashvili sought Georgia's sovereign independence, territorial integrity, and Euro-Atlantic orientation one of the fundamental priorities for the country's long-term development (Pkhaldze and Silaev 2011; Stent 2015, 106; Bedianashvili 2013a; Bedianashvili, Gogiashvili and Pavliasvili, 2016), On the other side of the globe, Vladimir Putin entered Russian politics with a strong determination to reverse the humiliating decade of the 1990s, recreate strong Russian statehood and restore its role as a Great Power. Some were quick to make a parallel between the foreign policy of Putin to the one of Joseph Stalin (Sikharulidze 2014, 114).

Mikhail Saakashvili developed closer ties with the NATO since October 29, 2004, through the IPAP (Individual Partnership Action Plan), according to which Georgia modified its political, security and defense system in accordance with the NATO standards. Further positive steps had been taken in September 2006, when the NATO-Georgia commission was established and Georgia was given a real opportunity to engage in an active dialogue with the NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, 2019). Initially, the NATO-Georgia relations started in 1992, shortly after Georgia regained independence from the Soviet Union. Georgia joined the North Atlantic Cooperation Council in 1992, whilst the NATO-Georgia bilateral cooperation began in 1994 when Georgia joined the partnership for peace program. Mutual relations were deepened in 2003, following the 'Rose revolution' when Saakashvili "pushed for more ambitious reforms with the NATO" (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation 2019). In the national security concept of Georgia adopted on May 30, 2005, the following was highlighted:

Georgia as the Black Sea and South-Eastern European state has historically been a geographic, political and cultural part of Europe. Therefore, integration into European and Euro-Atlantic political, economic and security systems is the firm will of Georgian people. Georgia welcomes the NATO and the EU enlargement and believes that integration of the Black Sea states into the NATO and the EU will significantly reinforce the security of the Black Sea Region as the South-Eastern border of Europe. Integration to the NATO and the EU represents a top priority of Georgian foreign and security policy (Ministry of the Foreign Affairs of Georgia 2020).

In response to Saakashvili's foreign policy strategy, Russia initiated a full-scale economic blockade against Tbilisi. In December 2005, Russia banned Georgian products,

including fruits and vegetables to the Russian market under the alleged reason of ‘violating the standards of microbiological composition’, whilst a year later, in March 2006, Moscow banned wine imports from Georgia, which, in turn, negatively affected Georgia’s economy. The Russian embargo caused the economic collapse in Georgia since Russia has been Georgia’s strongest trade partner and it was practically impossible for the country to replace the Russian market into the other potential one in the region (see: Table 1).

Table 1: Chronology of Sanctions by Russia

(Source: Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development of Georgia)

Date	Event
December 19, 2005	Ban on imports of agricultural products from Georgia
January, 2006	Sharp increase in the price of gas imported from Russia
March 15, 2006	Ban on import of Georgian wine, wine products, brandy and champagne
May, 5, 2006	Ban on imports of Georgian mineral water
July 8, 2006	Georgian-Russian border checkpoint at Verkhniy Lars closed
September 27, 2006	Arrest of Russian officers by Georgian authorities
September 28, 2006	Russia recalled its ambassador in Georgia, and began a partial evacuation of Russian diplomatic staff from Georgia
October 3, 2006	Russia suspended air, rail, road, sea and postal links to Georgia, and stopped issuing entry visas to Georgian citizens
January 2007	Another sharp increase in the price of gas imported from Russia

Saakashvili’s pro-western and anti-Russian stance sparked furious reactions in Russia. In addition, Georgia’s pipeline projects further increased the tension between Tbilisi and Moscow. As a result of the projects such as Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan, Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum, Nabucco, Traceca, White Stream, etc., Georgia has become an important transport hub and an essential component of Europe's energy security.

The mentioned appeared to be inconsistent with Russia's national interest and its long-term objectives in the South Caucasus region (Pkhaldze and Silaev 2011, 12). At the Munich conference held on February 10, 2007, in Germany, Vladimir Putin strictly criticized the US foreign policy and the NATO's Eastern enlargement:

I think it is obvious that NATO expansion does not have any relation with the modernization of the alliance itself or with ensuring security in Europe. On the contrary, it represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust. And we have the right to ask: against whom is this expansion intended? And what happened to the assurances our western partners made after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact? Where are those declarations today? No one even remembers them (President of Russia 2007).

As a consequence of several diplomatic meetings, during the NATO summit, held in Bucharest, in April 2008, the US supported giving the MAP (Membership Action Plan) to Georgia and Ukraine. The fact caused furious reactions in Moscow even the MAP did not guarantee the countries acceptance in the Organization (NATO 1949). At the summit, Putin declared that the deployment of a powerful military bloc at Russia's borders, whose members guide their actions by Article 5 of the Washington agreement, would be perceived by Russia as a direct threat to its national security.

On August 8, 2008, when the world's attention was focused on the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games in Beijing, Russian tanks rolled across the border into the Republic of Georgia following the months of violent instabilities between the Georgian and South Ossetian secessionist forces in one of the separatist regions of Georgia South Ossetia/Tskhinvali region (King 2008, 1-2). The Russian-Georgian war in August 2008 ended with the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states by Russia. The war resulted in hundreds of dead humans and brought innumerable damages to Georgian economy. Thousands of refugees were forced to leave their homeland. Russian air forces bombed and destroyed Georgian air and naval bases, apartment buildings, Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, etc. (Jodjua 2010).

Western media was quick to draw a parallel between the political events of 1938-1968 and Russia's War in Georgia. More concretely, when Adolf Hitler invaded Sudetenland and Leonid Brezhnev intervened militarily in former Czechoslovakia. As Highlighted by King (2008), unlike the historic events of 1938 and 1968, in 2008 "older and more typically Russian patterns were at work". In August 2008, Russian President, Dmitry Medvedev signed a document according to which Russia officially recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. The US swiftly responded to the fact. As stated by Bush "The territorial integrity and borders of Georgia must be respected, just as those of Russia or any other country. Russia's action only exacerbates tensions and complicates diplomatic negotiations. In accordance with United Nations Security Council Resolutions that remain in force, Abkhazia

and South Ossetia are within the internationally recognized borders of Georgia, and they must remain so" (The White House 2008). As argued by Popescu

(...) the paradox is that until August 2008, Abkhazia and South Ossetia had been unrecognized but *de facto* independent states. In August 2008, after the war, they were partially recognized, although, in reality, both regions cannot be considered more independent than they were before. If the separatist war [of the early 1990s] was their 'war for independence', the war in August 2008 is the war that puts an end their limited yet '*de facto* independence'. The winner of the war was Russia and not the separatist movements. Both Abkhazia and South Ossetia are speedily transforming from 'virtually independent states' into territorial entitles of the Russian Federation (Haindrava 2011, 116).

Although the two contradictory narratives have been created about which side started the war, on the other hand, it appeared to be certainly clear that 2008 events have been an impressive hard power exhibition of Russia. Moscow showed the rest of the world that it still considers Georgia 'a sphere of its influence' and it still maintains its role as a great power among the world's biggest global players. Russian-Georgian war in 2008 led the Russian-Georgian relations to the lowest point. The five-day-war has clearly demonstrated that the Eurasian continent is still facing serious security dilemmas in the twenty-first century. On August 29, in response to Medvedev's recognition of the breakaway regions of Georgia as independent states, Georgia cut diplomatic relations with Russia. A year later, in 2009 Georgia withdrew from the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States). From 2008 until 2012 all forms of diplomatic relations between Russia and Georgia were terminated.

RUSSIA'S 'CREEPING ANNEXATION' OF GEORGIAN TERRITORIES AND ITS ECONOMIC PRESSURE ON GEORGIA AS A FORM OF PUNISHMENT

Following the Russian-Georgian war Georgia experienced a deep economic and financial crisis. Tbilisi ceased diplomatic relations with Moscow and Russia's market for Georgia had closed. Yet in 2005-2007 the Russian embargo on major Georgian products, including wine and mineral water resulted in the economic downturn in the country, since after Turkey, Russia has been and remains the second-largest importer of Georgian products near abroad. Moreover, visa restrictions and oppressions on Georgian labor migrants in Russia further sharpened the mutual relations between Tbilisi and Moscow.

Russian-Georgian relations underwent drastic changes under the political coalition of the 'Georgian dream', which won the 2012 parliamentary elections. The new government carried out a more pragmatic policy towards Moscow. One of the main objectives of the newly elected government of Georgia became to separate political and economic issues between the two countries and improve economic relations with Moscow.

Bidzina Ivanishvili would repeatedly argue that improved relations with Russia did not conflict with Georgia's aspirations towards the Euro-Atlantic structures. "Ones, who want the closure of Russian market, are Georgian enemies", insisted Ivanishvili (Interpress News 2019).

In November 2012, an experienced Georgian career diplomat who had earlier served as Georgia's ambassador in Moscow, Zurab Abashidze, was appointed a special representative of Bidzina Ivanishvili for mutual negotiations with Moscow to restore broke diplomatic ties with Russia following the Russian-Georgian war. The format initiated a discussion on 'humanitarian, trade and economic issues, but also security issues facing both Georgia and Russia-terrorism and arms trafficking'. The mentioned marked the beginning of the so-called "Abashidze-Karasin format" (Agenda.ge 2018). As a consequence of frequent meetings between Zuran Abashidze and Grigory Karasin, Moscow gradually reopened trade ties with Georgia which in turn, made a positive impact on the Georgian economy. Moreover, the state Duma welcomed Russian tourists to visit Georgia and recommended Georgian resorts (see: Figure 1).



Figure 1: Money Flowing from Russia to Georgia (Source: The National Statistics Office of Georgia 2019).

According to the National Statistics Center of Georgia, the export of Georgian wine and mineral water to the Russian market in 2013 increased by 315% in comparison to 2012, while the imports had improved by 24% compared to 2012. The economic profit gained from the Russian market has increased in the following years as well. Russian-Georgian bilateral trade has improved by 17% in 2016, while in 2017 Georgian wine exports to Russia grew by 86% (amounted 23.740.750 bottles of wine), which has further increased in numbers in 2018. As published by Georgian national wine agency, from 2013 to 2018, after China, Russia was the second-largest importer of Georgian wine (see: Figure 2).

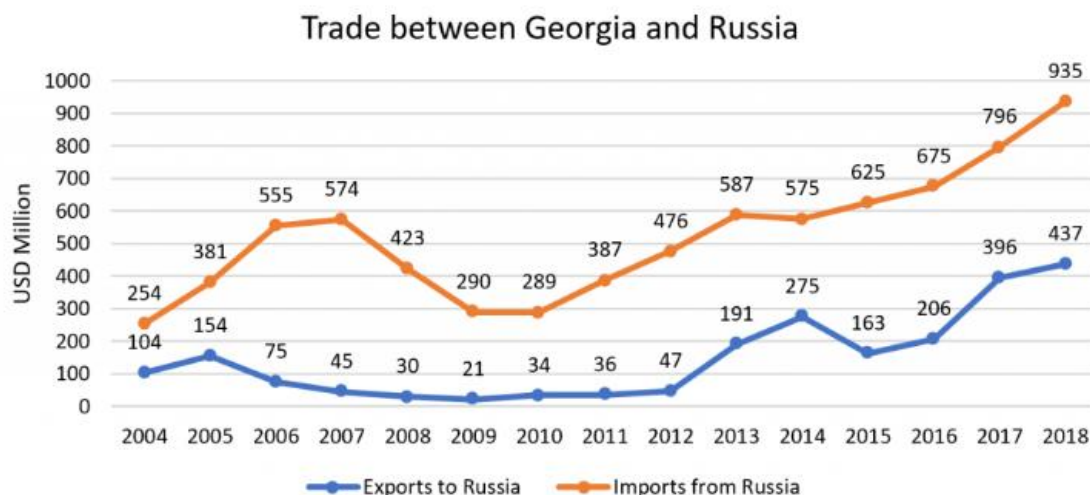


Figure 2: Trade between Georgia and Russia (Source: National Statistics Office of Georgia 2019).

According to the National Tourism Agency of Georgia, more than 1.6 million Russian tourists visited Georgia in 2018 out of which each Russian tourist spent approximately 510 US dollars while their stays in the country (see: Figure 3).

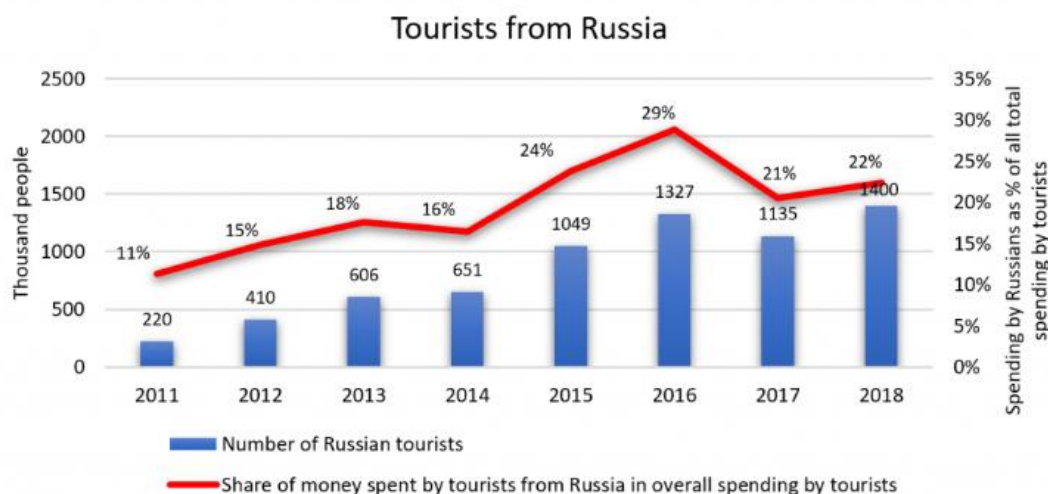


Figure 3: Tourists from Russia (Source: National tourism administration of Georgia 2019).

Russia is the third-largest immigrant population country in the world after the US and Germany. According to the State Ministry for Diaspora issues of Georgia, based on 2015 statistics, the total number of Georgians living abroad amounted to 1.607.754 people, among whom almost 800.000 Georgians living in the Russian Federation.

According to the statistical data, published by the National Bank of Georgia, almost half of the total amount of money transferred to Georgia in 2012-2018 came from Russia (see: Figure 4).

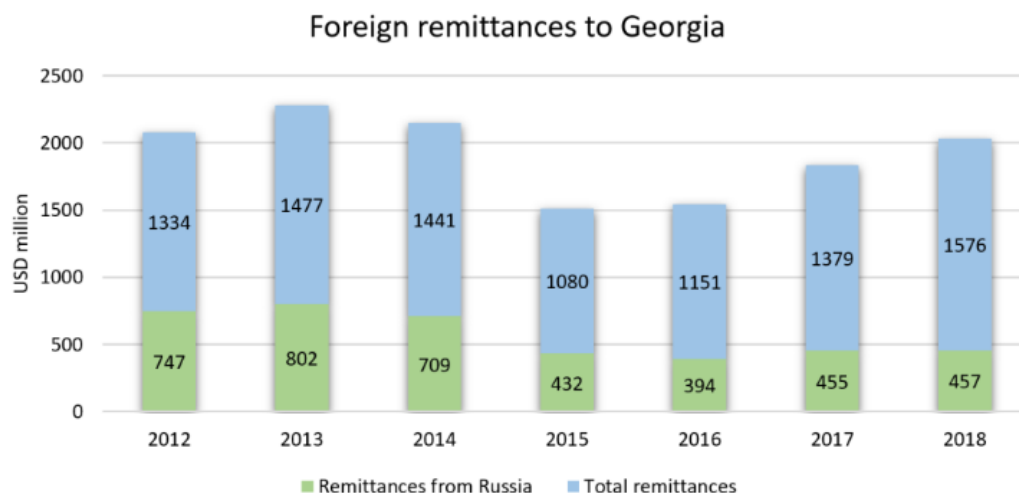


Figure 4: Foreign Remittances to Georgia (Source: National Bank of Georgia 2019)

Even Russian-Georgian relations considerably improved in 2012-2018, Russia's 'creeping annexation' of Georgian territories has remained one of the major challenges in the relations between the two countries. Russia still opposes Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration and interferes with the territorial integrity of the country. In 2012, after the power shift in Georgia, Russia's ambassador to the NATO, Alexander Grushko stated: "As far as Georgia is concerned, I am sure that NATO understands the seriousness of consequences that any step towards further engagement of Georgia with the alliance, Russia-NATO relations and European Security" (Civil.ge 2012).

Georgia is the NATO's one of the closest partners. The country actively contributes to the NATO-led operations worldwide. Following the Russian-Georgian war, the NATO continues to support Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty within its internationally recognized borders and calls on Russia to reverse its recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. Currently, Georgia provides valued support for the NATO-led operations in Afghanistan (Chitadze 2011b).

Since 2009, Russia has increased the military forces in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and pursued the policy of 'creeping annexation' in the occupied territories of Georgia. Currently, 20% of Georgian territories are occupied by the Russian Federation. Russian-backed separatists further move the state border near the Georgian-controlled villages daily. People are forced to leave their homes, belongings and cultivated lands that are beyond the

occupants' demarcation lines. Clear illustrations of Russia's oppressive policy are Georgian citizens: Giga Otkhozoria, Archil Tatumashvili, and Irakli Kvaratskhelia who were killed by the Russian regime in the occupied regions of Georgia. The international community, including EU, NATO and US vigorously condemns Russia's 'creeping annexation' in Georgia and call on Russia to stop the occupation of a sovereign country and respect the fundamental rights of the local civilian population.

The 2019 anti-government protests in Georgia, also known as 'Gavrilov's night' hit a new low point to Russian-Georgian relations and once again demonstrated Russia's well-defined foreign policy strategy in Georgia. Mass protests in Tbilisi began on June 20, when Sergey Gavrilov, a member of the Communist Party of Russian Duma visited Georgia to participate in Inter-Parliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy. Sergey Gavrilov occupied the Georgian Parliamentary speaker's chair and delivered a speech in which he enthusiastically praised the brotherhood of Georgian and Russian people under the same religious-Orthodox Christianity. His speech sparked mass protests in front of the Parliament of Georgia. The protests demanded the government's resignation with placards: 'Russia is an occupier'.

Georgian President, Salome Zurbishvili declared that 'Russia is an enemy and occupier'. Zurbishvili directly suspected the Kremlin of helping in 'stirring the unrest' in Georgia. As the Prime Minister of Russia Dmitry Medvedev stated, Zurbishvili's claim was a 'distortion of reality' (National Post 2019). In response to anti-Russian protests in Tbilisi, which Russia viewed as 'radical Russophobia', Putin temporarily suspended direct flights between Russia and Georgia, which came into force on July 8 (REUTERS 2019).

On July 6, Georgian opposition TV host Giorgi Gabunia in his live news show 'Postscriptum' used highly offensive language towards the President of Russia. He insulted Putin's late parents. Georgian government promptly reacted to the event. Georgia's Prime Minister condemned Gabunia's vulgar rant, and noted: "This is a war by provocateurs against their country, a dirty and disgusting game with the security of the state and citizens. (...) He [Gabunia] has allowed himself something that is unacceptable for Georgia! This is called damaging the interests of one's state!" posted Salome Zurbishvili on her Facebook page.

Gabunia's statement caused furious reactions in the State Duma. Top Russian officials supported the idea of closing the Russian market for Georgia, by banning the imports of Georgian wine and mineral water to the Russian market, as well as banning the remittances between the two countries. However, Vladimir Putin opposed the economic sanctions against Georgia. "I would not do that out of respect for the Georgian people", stated the President of Russia (First Channel 2019). Furthermore, Russian foreign policy strategy has undergone significant transformation in recent years by strengthening a soft power in Georgia which in turn, is shaped with Kremlin's powerful propaganda. Since the methods and tools used by the Russian media are becoming more and more refined and sophisticated in the XXI century compared to propaganda used by the Soviet Union, it is one of the effective mechanisms for Kremlin to widely spread disinformation and promote pro-Russian and anti-Western rhetoric.

CONCLUSION

The evaluation of Russia's foreign policy towards Georgia clearly shows that the Kremlin continuously employs political and economic leverage on Georgia to achieve its policy goals in the region. Russia actively uses complex tools and methods to spread anti-Western and pro-Russian rhetoric across wider society, and undermines Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations. Moscow, directly and indirectly, influences Georgian political actors, church, and media and occupies 20% of Georgian territories. Furthermore, Russian-backed separatists erect barbed wire fences along the administrative border of the occupied regions and detain Georgian people. Paradoxically enough, Russia's foreign policy towards Georgia has never been straightforward. Following the disintegration of the USSR, every new attempt of Georgia to improve the relationship with its Northern neighbor failed due to Russia's imperial approach towards Tbilisi, which simply demonstrates its 'divide and conquer' strategy in the former Soviet space.

The paper argued that Russia's military intervention in Georgia (August 2008) was a clear illustration of classical realism, that is, the hard power exhibition of Moscow. It was a direct message to Washington that Russia still maintains its role as a great power among the world's dominant political actors and still applies 'the rule of the jungle' to defend its 'national interests'.

From another standpoint, following the war, Russian-Georgian relations remained rather strained, filled with mutual suspicion and a lack of trust. Yet, before the war, Russian embargo on Georgian products in 2006 adversely affected the Georgian economy since after Turkey; Russia has been and remains the second-largest importer of Georgian products near abroad. Russian embargo, on the other side, triggered strong debates among the economic experts in Georgia that the Russian market would no more be a solid foothold for Georgian business in the long run. However, it appeared to be practically impossible for Georgia to replace the Russian market by a potential alternative in the region, due to several reasons, such as: high demands for Georgian products (especially wine and mineral water) in Russia; historical proximity and long-established trade ties between the two countries; and shared culture and religious beliefs that are still deeply embedded in the perception of many Russian and Georgian people, particularly the old generation who have lived and grown up in the Soviet Union.


Furthermore, Russian foreign policy strategy has undergone significant transformation in recent years by strengthening a soft power in Georgia which, in turn, is shaped with Kremlin's powerful propaganda. Since the methods and tools used by the Russian media are becoming more and more refined and sophisticated in the twenty-first century compared to propaganda used by the Soviet Union, it is one of the effective mechanisms for Kremlin to widely spread disinformation and promote pro-Russian and anti-Western rhetoric.

In Georgia, Russia actively manipulates with the following major instruments of hybrid warfare: 'creeping occupation' and *de facto* regimes; soft power through propaganda; information war; and covert operations. Thus, Moscow frequently employs a combination of hard power and soft power to achieve its political ends in the South Caucasus and uses economic pressure as a 'punishment' of Georgian people for their 'misbehavior'. As long as Russia's creeping annexation of Georgian territories and its political and economic pressure on Georgia continue, it is highly unlikely Kremlin to change the course towards Tbilisi in the foreseeable future.

It should definitely be emphasized that 'creeping annexation' is not only an act of illegal occupation of Georgian territories, Russia, on the one hand, aims at weakening Georgia's economy, and on the other hand, tries to increase the dependence of Georgian export on the Russian market. Furthermore, Russia interferes with Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration and diminishes the status of the country on an international stage by showing the rest of the world that Georgia is unable to independently carry out its political course without the support of Moscow.

Under the current tense political relations between Russia and Georgia, it becomes certainly clear that the more Georgia increases its ties with the US, the NATO, and the EU, the more unpredictable Russia's reactions could be in the region, in response. For instance, with this scenario, Russia is expected to strengthen pro-Russian forces in Georgia, create political instability in the country and undermines its democratic development; or with another scenario, Moscow is expected to again impose economic sanctions on Georgia. Tbilisi should better prepare for that.

In light of Russia's current foreign policy towards Georgia, there is no reason to believe that there will be positive changes in Russian-Georgian relations in the near future. It is difficult to foresee a positive dynamic for the peaceful resolution of the Georgian conflicts as well. From the mentioned perspective, Georgia should further strengthen its ties and increase strategic partnerships with the West and Europe to stand firm against the threats coming from Russia.

In the economic context, the Georgian government should first and foremost take all the possible measures to reduce the economic dependence on Russia and furthermore, work to diversify Georgian exports abroad. Currently, Georgia has a free trade agreement with the EU and China which, in this regard, represents a huge success for the country. 

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